
D. Hume

(Before reading the following lecture, you should review the RealPlayer presentation for Module Five, entitled "Getting Reasonable: History of a Controversy")

The Role of Reason

In the audio/slide show presentation for this module, I attempted to show what is at stake in the old, old controversy about whether being ethical is essentially about acting and thinking rationally or not. As you saw there, this controversy is not yet resolved (for one thing, the more recent evolutionary psychological and anthropological ideas from the last module raise the question of whether morality is about reason, maximizing "inclusive fitness" or obeying certain instincts). *As with previous modules, for this one please read the "Background" section before the primary source reading in the Singer text. For each reading, there is a recap of the main points in "The Argument" sections.*

The key "Big Question" that we will see addressed from a variety of viewpoints in this module is "Are ethics objective or 'merely' subjective?" As I stressed in the slide show, those thinkers who favor a closer alignment of reason and ethics usually also think that morality and moral obligations are objective—they are not mere conventions, habits, or matters of choice. These thinkers usually think there are such things as *moral facts*—universal truths about what is good and bad, wrong or right. On the other hand, those critical of the place of reason in ethics usually believe that ethics is "merely" subjective—that it is an expression of emotions or individual preferences. Briefly, here are how the authors in this section stack up with regard to this distinction:

Ethics are objective	Ethics are subjective
Immanuel Kant	David Hume
Henry Sidgwick	Edward Westermarck
Thomas Nagel	Jean-Paul Sartre
Virginia Held	

I. Hume again!
A. BACKGROUND

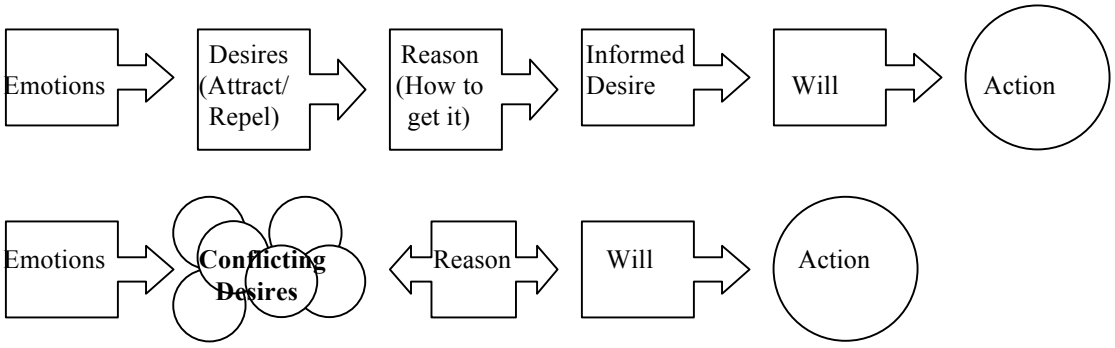
Please see the **fifth section** of the lecture for **Module 2** for background on **David Hume**.

B. THE ARGUMENT

1. At the beginning of this excerpt from his *Treatise on Human Nature*, Hume tells us a familiar story about the nature of morality: reason and the emotions (or "sentiments" as they were often called in Hume's time) are opposed to each other and while the emotions constantly get us into trouble, our only hope for being

ethical is to allow reason to "get the better" of our emotions. Lots of thinkers have held this view—two of the most prominent ones that we have already studied are Plato and Kant. But Hume doesn't share this view—remember in the selection from Module 2, he outlined a very different conflict in each of us, that of our self-interested desires *versus* our emotions and sympathies for others and for the public good. Hume's story is motivated by his thesis, at the end of the first paragraph: **"I shall endeavor to prove first, that reason alone can never be a motive to any action of the will; and *secondly*, that it can never oppose passion in the direction of the will"** (p. 118).

2. Here is how Hume tries to prove this, in four easy steps:
   - Like other creatures, we feel pleasure and pain. Emotions are connected to these sensations by being grouped into two different types: emotions of *aversion* (avoidance) and of *propensity* (attraction). These emotions are motivators for action.
   - Hume believes, like many other philosophers, that while we have an ongoing conflict between these emotions, we settle on one and it is our faculty of *will* (volition) that enables us to act. What does the "settling"? For most philosophers, the answer is: reason.
   - But Hume doesn't give reason this role. Instead, he says, it only **"directs our judgment concerning causes and effects"** (p. 118) Read p. 119 carefully, up to Hume's famous quote: **"Reason is, and ought only to be the slave of the passions, and can never pretend to any other office than to serve and obey them."** Reason, for Hume, is a *tool* that we use to get what we want and avoid the things we want to avoid.
   - Therefore, reason doesn't tell us what we ought to want, or what is right or wrong above and beyond what attracts or repels us. **"Nothing can oppose or retard the impulse of passion, but a contrary impulse,"** Hume writes (p. 119).
3. Given what we've just said, here are two diagrams that involve the emotions, desire, reason and will. Look them over and see if you can determine which is Hume's and which is the traditional philosopher's (like Plato or Aristotle):



Did you figure out that the first diagram is Hume's view, while the second is the traditional one that he rejects? If you did, good on you! Also notice why Hume's ethics are controversial: in his view, reason doesn't "sort out" conflicting desires,

marking some as reasonable and others as unreasonable (and thus to be automatically rejected). What do you think he means when he writes, "'Tis not contrary to reason to prefer the destruction of the whole world to the scratching of my finger. 'Tis not contrary to reason for me to [choose] my total ruin, to prevent the least uneasiness of an Indian or person wholly unknown to me"? What if you knew that you would destroy the world by scratching your itching finger? For Hume, reason does not play the role of conscience, telling us that it is rational to prefer saving the world, and so we should not scratch our finger. Rather, it is because we have a *greater desire* to not destroy the world that we would (I hope we would!) refrain from doing so. In fact, there are only two situations in which Hume would call a passion "unreasonable":

- When a desire is aimed at a nonexistent object (it *does* make sense, if reason tells us we have unattainable goals, to give them up).
- In cases of self-deception ("In short, a passion must be accompany'd with some false judgment, in order to its being unreasonable; and even then 'tis not the passion, properly speaking, which is unreasaonble, but the judgment," p. 120).

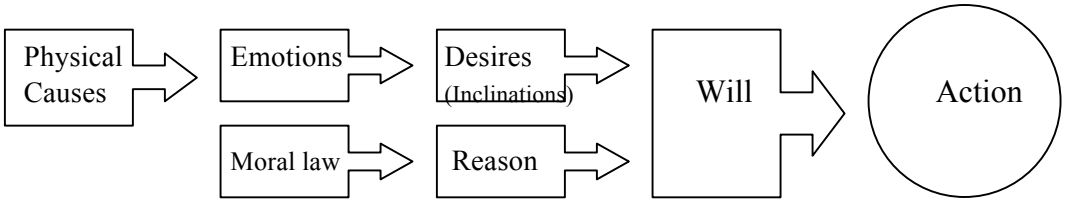
4. One implication of Hume's view is made clear on p. 121: "Upon the whole, 'tis impossible, that the distinction betwixt moral good and evil, can be made by reason...." Hume endorses a position in ethical philosophy called **emotivism**, which is the idea that statements of good and bad, right and wrong, don't correspond to "moral facts" about the world. Instead, they express our emotions, and particular, our attraction or repulsion, to things or ideas. So, for Hume, a value statement like "Murder is wrong" is less like the statement, "Olympia is the capital of Washington" and more like the claim, "I don't like pizza; it's too fattening." If enough people share the moral sentiment that murder is wrong, they'll outlaw it and punish those who commit murder. But this is not because murder is in some way irrational, for Hume: it is simply because most of us have strong emotions about it.
5. One final implication of Hume's view is the **naturalistic fallacy**, which if you remember we discuss in the audio/slide presentation for the last module. You'll find Hume's statement of the problem near the bottom of p. 122, in the paragraph that begins, "I cannot forebear adding to these reasonings..." Hume seems to think that statements of fact and statements of value are two different things because facts and values can't be translated into one another. Do you see how taking this idea seriously would also lead to **emotivism**? What do you think about Hume's conclusions?

II: Kant revisited!
A. BACKGROUND

You only need to read pp. 123-129 of this selection. Please do re-read the **first section** of the **Module 3 lecture** for background on **Immanuel Kant**. This background section will refresh you on some basic presuppositions of his ethical theory.

B. THE ARGUMENT

1. Kant starts with a bold statement: the only thing that is **intrinsically** good, or is "good in itself," is *a good will*. Kant doesn't define what "a good will" is, but he seems to have a common-sense meaning in mind: it is the intention to do the right thing. But why is a good will the *only* intrinsically good thing? Kant's reasoning for this on pp. 123-124 is that it is the only thing that cannot be used to evil or malicious ends. Intelligence, money, power and other things may be sought as goods, but they may also be misused, or may lead to awful consequences. Kant insulates the good will from these possibilities by saying something on p. 124 that distinguishes him from many of the other ethicists we've studied so far, including Hume and Aristotle: "The good will is not good because of what it effects or accomplishes or because of its adequacy to achieve some proposed end; it is good only because of its willing, i.e. it is good of itself." Is Kant saying that a good will is to be valued, even if by intending to do the right thing, we bring about bad consequences (the old "road to hell paved with good intentions" idea)?
2. Starting on p. 124, Kant brings reason into the picture. Remember that Hume had said that reason is a tool of our emotional drives and desires (a "slave of the passions," he wrote). In a sense, reason for him is an instrument for finding us better routes to happiness. But Kant disagrees, adopting the almost Darwinian-sounding dictum that, in creatures like us, "…no organ will be found for any purpose which is not the fittest and best adapted to that purpose" (p. 124). Is reason well-adapted to make us happier? Not really, Kant says, since it often "spoils the party" by reminding us of our diets and appointments, bringing up facts that make us feel guilty, etc. Rather, Kant says, reason must have a "more worthy" purpose. It is "given to us as a practical faculty, i.e. one which is meant to have an influence on the will" (p. 125). But if its influence is not to make us happier, perhaps it is to remind us of our duty, and in doing so, to motivate us to take the stance of the "good will" described above.
3. If you recall, in the section on Hume we looked at two diagrams representing the various human faculties, like emotions, reason, and the will. Kant doesn't approve of either Hume's or the traditional version of this equation of how we act morally. His diagram would look something like this:



This is one diagram, not two—notice the two parallel tracks, both of which can end up in action. Along the top track, Kant says, we are little more than animals when we allow physical, psychological or biochemical causes to determine our desires, resulting in actions that merely serves our self-interested inclinations. These actions don't have any moral worth, to Kant. Along the bottom track, when we use reason to act according to the moral law, we act out of a good will, and both our will and our action (if we are successful at acting), do have moral worth. Notice that being rational is equated with being moral, so if you decide to be immoral, you are also being irrational (Kant says on p. 129 that, if I am trying to be moral, that "…I should never act in such a way that I could not will that my maxim [statement of my intentions] should be a universal law." Kant does not make it clear what he means here, but this statement, the central thrust of his moral theory, implies that we are forbidden from doing any action that couldn't equally be done by everybody else in the world. This would prohibit cheating, stealing, and lying, for example, and we'll discuss this principle, the **categorical imperative**, in greater detail in Module 9).

4. When we act according to reason, we follow the bottom track of the diagram above, effectively "actualizing" the moral law through our will and action. For Kant, this is *obeying our duty*. Kant makes an important distinction between knowing our duty—examples are to always avoid lying and to often be charitable to others in need—and doing it for selfish or sympathetic reasons, *versus* knowing our duty and doing it for the sole legitimate *moral* reason. This reason is, *do your duty for duty's sake*. What this implies is that moral actions are differently motivated from *every other kind of thing we might do*. If I buy the new Dixie Chicks CD, it's because I'm motivated by my desire to hear more of their kind of music; if I spend time helping my kids with their homework, it's because I want them to have as good of an education as I received; if I give money to a TV charity helping children in Africa, my motivation is empathy with those kids. But none of these actions has moral worth, for Kant, because they have the wrong motivator.
5. So once I know my duties, I do them for duty's sake and duty's sake alone: this is Kant's view. What are some duties of mine, according to him? On pp. 126-127, he tells us three, to which I add one discussed elsewhere in Kant (I added this one in [square brackets]):

- the duty to preserve one's own life;
- [the duty to tell the truth];
- the duty to be charitable to others;
- the duty to make oneself happy.

Notice that we have duties to ourselves (the first and the fourth) as well as others. There is one more Kantian distinction here, that is, between *perfect* duties (the first two) and *imperfect* duties (the last two). Perfect duties are those which bind us all the time, 24/7—we are *never* allowed to endanger or take (through suicide)

our own life or lie to others. But we also have some duties which, while we must fulfill them, we can see that we could not fulfill them *all the time*. If we were charitable to everyone who needed time or money, we wouldn't be able to fulfill our other duties and on top of that, we'd be broke! And if we spent all our time making ourselves happy, we'd again run into a time bind with fulfilling all those other good duties. We'll discuss Kant's moral theory in greater detail in Module 9, so Kant gets to chill until then.

III. Sidgwick and Westermarck: a turn-of-the-century debate
A. BACKGROUND

The work of the "last great utilitarian," **Henry Sidgwick** (1828-1900) in his book *The Methods of Ethics* is the starting point for any present-day discussion of morality based on consequences (utilitarianism is a school of ethical thought that begins with David Hume). Sidgwick's goal was to argue for certain "self-evident" **axioms** or principles of ethics that are universally acceptable because they are intuitively acceptable to any reasonable person. Sidgwick's late contemporary **Edward Westermarck** (1862-1939) was an anthropologist who did his fieldwork in Morocco and later turned his attention to moral philosophy in his book *The Origin and Development of the Moral Ideas*. He holds to a kind of cultural relativism about value.

B. THE ARGUMENT

1. At the beginning of the selection from *Methods of Ethics*, utilitarian Henry Sidgwick asks, can we "…find any way of obtaining self-evident moral principles of real significance?" (p. 134) A self-evident principle is something that doesn't need to be proven (like "A = A" or "If Spokane is east of Seattle, then Seattle is west of Spokane") and Sidgwick seems to think that common sense compels us to think that there are such things. However, Sidgwick himself notes something that I flagged in the audio/slide presentation for Module 3—that our increasing knowledge of the diversity of beliefs and practices in the world leads us to think that there might not be universal moral principles, and thus Sidgwick's search for them might be in vain. Nonetheless, he does not intend to give up easily.
2. Here is what we do know, according to Sidgwick: consistency seems to be such a principle. We find it both in the Golden Rule and in basic rules of justice (p. 135). Sidgwick frames the principle of consistency as so: "[W]hatever action any of us judges to be right for himself, he implicitly judges to be right for all similar persons in similar circumstances" (p. 134). In discussing justice, Sidgwick says that the consistency principle lends itself to an *ethics of impartiality*—when applying rules, we ought to apply them fairly and impartially (this still leaves it an open question, Sidgwick says, *which* rules we should apply fairly). Sidgwick also spends a bit of time talking about what it means for something to be "good on the whole"—he seems to think that this is another application of the principle of consistency. He says, for example, that to be consistent in making ethical decisions that only regard myself, I ought not to give

the demands of the present any more or less weight than long-term goals: "that Hereafter *as such* is to be regarded neither less nor more than Now" (p. 136).

3. When we extend the idea of the "good on the whole" version of the consistency principle to a consideration of our relationships with others, Sidgwick thinks we discover another self-evident principle, what we might call the *equality principle*, or "…that the good of any one individual is of no more importance, from the point of view…of the Universe, than the good of any other" (p. 136). From the consistency and equality principles, Sidgwick "deduces" what he calls the *maxim of Benevolence*: "…that each one [person] is morally bound to regard the good of any individual as much as his own, except in so far as he judges it to be less, when partially viewed or less certainly knowable or attainable by him" (pp. 136-37). While Sidgwick thinks that every "common man" would think this maxim expresses genuine moral obligations (and thus that it, too, is self-evident), the truth of this is far from clear. Can you, for example, think of a situation in which people commonly ignore this maxim?
4. In direct contrast to Sidgwick's view that self-evident "axioms" of ethics could be found that would receive universal support by all rational people, Edward Westermarck holds a view that could be called "cultural relativism" (following my meaning for the term in the audio/slide show for Module 3). Westermarck believes that culture and society are all that are needed to explain people's beliefs about right and wrong: "public indignation and public approval are the prototypes of the moral emotions," he writes on pp. 137-138. Rather than saying that some ethical statements are true because they are more rationally acceptable (as Sidgwick does), Westermarck claims that the real ethical differences in society mirror the distinction between the "unreflective" layperson, who misunderstands or is ignorant of facts, and the "reflective" intellectual who takes facts into account. You could imagine an example of this by envisioning a dialogue between a person who, on purely emotional grounds, attacks the practice of abortion and an expert on abortion practices who claims that while some cases of abortion are morally objectionable, others aren't.
5. Could we ever get clear on all the facts? Some ethical thinkers who aren't relativists like Westermarck—thinkers like **James Rachels**, who was also mentioned in the Module 3 slide show—believe that if we could agree on all the facts about a certain issue (like abortion) then we would agree on its rightness or wrongness. Westermarck disagrees, saying, that there are parts of our shared moral discussion where we will never reach consensus, mainly because "the *emotional constitution of man* does not present the same uniformity as the human intellect" (p. 139). The *emotive basis* for our value judgments (compare Hume here) is different based on our upbringing and temperament, and since this basis is key to the judgments we make, we should not expect to agree on moral issues so long as we are different in this crucial respect ("the contents of an emotion fall entirely outside the category of truth," 140). Notice also that Westermarck thinks that although we can progress from being "unreflective" to being "enlightened," that he also believes that a "fully developed moral consciousness" is a myth. Read the bottom of p. 139 closely: why do you think he believes this?

IV. Sartre: ethics without guidance
A. BACKGROUND

The French Marxist and social critic **Jean-Paul Sartre** (1905-1980) is well known for his philosophical works *Being and Nothingness* and *Critique of Dialectical Reason*, his plays and works of literature such as *Nausea* and *No Exit*, and is one of the most prominently satirized philosophers in Monty Python. Sartre is both an **atheist** and an **existentialist**, so he believes that since there is no God, we are all personally responsible for what we make of ourselves in terms of our existence. In contrast to thinkers such as Hume, Kant, and Sidgwick, Sartre is often grouped in with other ethical **decisionists**, who believe that there are ultimately no objective grounds for reaching a decision. Nonetheless, we must choose and act, Sartre says, and this is the challenge of freedom.

B. THE ARGUMENT

1. At the beginning of this excerpt from Sartre's "Existentialism is a Humanism," Sartre explains in his own words the basis for his approach to morality—atheistic existentialism. He quotes Dostoevsky as saying "If God did not exist, everything would be permitted." But is everything *really* permitted, for Sartre? Is there still some reason to be moral? What is the significance of saying, with Sartre, that "we are left alone, without excuse"?
2. "We are condemned to be free," Sartre says, and we are "condemned at every instant to invent man." Sartre implies that some people would really *not* prefer his version of freedom—the demand is put upon us to make decisions and act ethically, but without objective rules or principles (this is what "condemned seems to mean here—we have no choice but to be in this situation). Do you think, for Sartre, this is an exhilarating freedom or a kind of burden? The second half of Sartre's piece concerned the famous example of a student who is torn between fighting against the Nazis in the French Resistance during World War II, on the one hand, or taking care of his aging mother, on the other. In his "advice" to the student, Sartre methodically discounts all the various sources that the student could look to to solve his dilemma for him. What are these sources? Why does Sartre discount them? And what, ultimately, is his advice to the torn young student?

V. Nagel: why ethics are objective
A. BACKGROUND

Thomas Nagel is professor of law and philosophy at New York University, and author of *The Possibility of Altruism*, *Mortal Questions*, *The View from Nowhere*, *What Does It All Mean?*, and *Equality and Partiality* (from Singer, p.403).

B. THE ARGUMENT

1. In trying to show that the basis for morality is objective, and thus morality obligates all of us equally, Nagel confronts a question that we have not really examined since the Plato reading at the beginning of class: is something wrong merely because the rules say so? Here "rules" could be the views of parents or teachers, the dictates of military leaders or the President, even laws or the Constitution. Could the law of the land be wrong? Sure—for years, slavery was legal in the United States. Could the *Constitution* have immorality written into it? Many people don't know that in the early part of the 20th century, the Constitution was amended to make liquor illegal (the Prohibition years), and there is considerable controversy today over whether a similar amendment to define marriage as between a man and a woman is "writing discrimination into the Constitution" against gays and lesbians. What do you think about the difference between rules, laws, authorities, on the one hand, and what's morally right, on the other?
2. Here is one good way to reconstruct Nagel's argument by putting together its smaller pieces to see the whole:
    - Morality is about interpersonal relationships (that "something is wrong depends on its impact not just on the person who does it but on other people," p. 155).
    - We *should* care about others; if we don't, others see something wrong in us (p. 156).
    - While some answer the question, "*Why* should we care about others?" with a response that depends upon God's will, Nagel sees three problems with this: (a) there are plenty of people who don't believe in God who are moral; (b) God's will doesn't make something right or wrong, as we saw in the "Euthyphro problem" part of the Module 3 slide show/audio; (c) fear of punishment and hope of reward, seem to be the wrong moral motivations.
    - "There is no substitute for a direct concern for other people as the basis for morality," Nagel writes (p. 157), and this concern is manifested in our asking ourselves the question, previous to our doing certain suspect things (like stealing library books), "How would you like it if someone did that to you?"
    - The basis for our negative reaction to thinking about someone stealing books from our library, or other immoral things, is, for Nagel, *resentment*, and our resentment means that we think that others have a reason not to hurt us. "But if it's a reason anyone would have not to hurt anyone else in this way, then it's a reason *you* have not to hurt someone else in this way (since *anyone* means *everyone*)" (p. 158). When we suffer, Nagel says, it's not that it's *bad for us*, but it's *bad period*. It's never good, judged in the widest possible sense, for someone to be immoral.

VI: Held: reason and the "second sex"
A. BACKGROUND

Virginia Held is professor of philosophy at the City University of New York. She has been Visiting Professor at UCLA and Dartmouth, has also taught at Yale and Barnard, and was recently Truax Visiting Professor at Hamilton College. Her most recent books are *Rights and Goods: Justifying Social Action* and *Feminist Morality: Transforming Culture, Society, and Politics*.

B. THE ARGUMENT

1. "The history of philosophy, including the history of ethics, has been constructed from male points of view, and has been built on assumptions and concepts that are by no means gender-neutral," Held begins. But morality is, for people like Kant and Nagel, supposed to be *objective*. If Held can prove her point, does that prove that there is no objective morality, or merely that gender-biased moral theories can't claim objectivity? (Think of it this way—if the local sheriff is convicted of corruption, does that mean that there is no such thing as "rule of law" in the county? Or merely that this sheriff was not very good at enforcing rule of law?)
2. How does Held construct her case? Think of how we broke down Nagel's argument into its smaller pieces above. See if you can find her answers to these questions:
    - What is the reason *versus* emotion conflict important (p. 166)? Why has reason often been equated with maleness, and emotion with femaleness? Are reason and emotion treated with equal respect by most thinkers we have encountered so far?
    - Kant and the utilitarians, starting with Hume, disagree on many things, as we have seen. What do they have in common that is important to Held (p. 167-168)?
    - Held then turns to the effort to elaborate what a feminist ethics would look like. What points does she make about (a) the importance of context; (b) the significance of being part of relationships to women; (c) the "moral emotions"?

    Now that you've had some time since reading Carol Gilligan to reflect, what do *you* think about differing ethics for men and for women? Do you think your judgment on this is "objective," or is it influenced by your own gender?

C. Module 5 Writing Assignment (5 points)

1. Using help (if you wish) from one or more of the philosophers in this Module, defend *one* of the following claims about reason in moral life:
    a. Being moral may sometimes require us to make a great sacrifice, but we should only be willing to make such a sacrifice if everyone else is, too.
    b. What is "rational" in the way of morality is wholly dependent upon one's culture.